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Summary “Noordmans, philosophy and Christian leadership”

C.P. Boele

This book discusses how theologian Dr. O. Noordmans uses and evaluates philosophy within the framework of his theology and asks which perspectives his vision offers for current issues in this area. The argument focuses especially on the way Noordmans employed philosophy and therefore concrete topics are only discussed within that context. The emphasis is on the understanding (‘Verstehen’) of his theological motives and an analysis of his life and work in view of those motives. We ask the following four research questions: 1) Which concrete dangers does philosophy pose to theology according to Noordmans? 2) Does philosophy have a positive impact on theology as well? 3) Is there a pattern in the way in which Noordmans himself uses and evaluates philosophy? 4) In what way is his position relevant for current issues in the intersection of philosophy and theology?

Chapter 2 provides an inventory of the dangers Noordmans believes philosophy poses and arguments for his belief that they pose a damaging threat to theology. In general, Noordmans holds that philosophy is a threat by forcing theology, and in its wake the church, to be backwards looking, while it should be eschatological, that is to say, forwards looking, towards the Future of her Lord. This general danger can assume four different guises. First, philosophy can contaminate theology by trying to divine things about God’s Being by prying past the limits of His revealed Word, or by defining ‘principles’ above and beyond the Scriptures. The second threat follows from the first: theology or dogma is thus detached from life and humanity, because theology contaminated by philosophy allows man to float unmoored between abstract doctrine on the one hand and mysticism on the other, so that faith does not become truly personal. The third threat is the result of the first two: philosophy and philosophical ethics rob man of his Christian liberty and cause him to run aground in utopian romanticism or despondency. In the end, philosophy and theology contaminated by philosophy throw man back onto himself, who must then generate by himself that which has been given in Christ. The fourth threat follows from this, namely that the church too is forced backwards, causing it to be defined in historical rather than prophetic terms. The church will start to become a political actor, organise its physical presence and, above all, look backwards and extend reasoning towards historical documents, rather than stretching itself forward to that which lies ahead.

Although Noordmans holds that philosophy is primarily a threat to theology, it offers three limited advantages. These are described in chapter 3. The first is that philosophy gives insight into ideas and methods commonly used in theology, which is sufficient grounds for theologians to be acquainted with them. The second reason is that philosophy is sometimes able to portray broken human reality in a deeper and more moving manner than theology ever could. When theologians employ this ability, Christian preaching and theology benefit. In the third place, Noordmans believes that philosophy can keep theology from making methodological errors.

Chapter 4 describes the pattern visible in the manner in which Noordmans employs philosophy and it answers the third research question. By analogy of Noordmans’ famous statement in which he called Creation ‘a place where light falls around the Cross’, it can be said that philosophy is ‘a place where light falls around theology.’ This means in the first place that theology unmasks the inadequacy of philosophy, just as the real Creation is best revealed in the light of the Cross, and revealed as fallen Creation. That means that in that place, within that space, one ought to think and speak theologically, and theology needs to be constantly on its guard against contamination by philosophy. In the second place, this means that within the circle of light cast by theology there is, according to Noordmans, a certain space for philosophy, in which it serves theology.

Chapter 5 is a historical and biographical chapter that answers the question how Noordmans interpreted the context in which he himself lived in light of his theological evaluation of philosophy. The historical context in which he lived can also be called ‘a place of light’, namely surrounding his theological evaluation of philosophy. In other words: in Noordmans’ view, the history of his days illustrates the fundamental inadequacy of philosophy and all theologies contaminated by philosophy, just as Creation only comes clearly into view in the light of the Cross as sinful, fallen Creation. Noordmans considered not only nineteenth-century humanist, philosophical ideals and virtues, but also any theology contaminated by them (including the Lutheran separation of church and state) to have run aground on the terrors of two world wars. The first half of the twentieth century he viewed as an eschatological, theological era that called for theology, not philosophy. The church and theology ought to cleanse themselves from their philosophical blemishes and return to the realisation that God has revealed himself as Father, Son and Spirit, and that an office bearer is not an official.

Chapter 6 describes the depth dimension or the conceptual framework in Noordmans’ theology that was distilled in the course of the research. It is contended that Noordmans considered any theology good if it met three criteria: it is theological (that is to say, free from philosophy), Trinitarian and eschatological. This framework will facilitate the study of Noordmans because it makes his theological judgements comprehensible and even predictable, a point that is illustrated with several examples. The framework can also be used as a measure for modern

Noordmans interpretations. By way of example a critical analysis is presented of a Noordmans study by G.W. Neven.

Chapter 7 applies Noordmans' judgement of philosophy and his theological framework to the modern phenomenon of 'Christian leadership'. This phenomenon, which emerged shortly after World War II, but only cautiously and dormant, now manifests itself quite openly: theologians, apologists, pastors and advisors who show or advocate 'leadership' and call on the 'school' to help the dwindling church. In terms of Noordmans' framework this inflicts theological, Trinitarian and eschatological damage to the church. Partially based on certain important motifs from the Bible and some voices from church history, the argument is made that Christian leadership is also a critical, biblical, Christian and theological term and should, therefore, be free from influences from philosophy. It does not mean that the church ought to be anarchistic or could exist without any form of authority or leadership, but it does mean that in its "leadership" it should be free from influences from secular management literature.

Chapter 8 makes Noordmans' framework fruitful for evaluating philosophical influences in current theology. This is only an indication of the direction for possible further and more specific research. When we examine a number of main strands of thought in modern theology through the lens of Noordmans' framework, we can conclude that it still contains a lot of philosophy. That makes Noordmans' plea for the practice of theology within the theological space extremely topical.